Chapter 17
A LETTER FROM CONSORT GYOKUYO?
YES. I WAS TOLD TO DELIVER THIS TO CONSORT ADUO DIRECTLY.
OH DEAR.
CONSORT ADUO IS CURRENTLY ATTENDING A TEA PARTY.
SHP

SHOULD I TAKE THAT TO MEAN I WAS RIGHT?
THERE IS SOMETHING I WISH TO DISCUSS WITH YOU.
VERY WELL.
COME INSIDE.

Chapter 17 Honey ②

THUNK
THUNK
THUNK
THUNK
WE DON'T NEED ANY MORE HELP, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE HERE FOR.
SO WOULD YOU MIND TELLING ME WHAT YOUR VISIT IS ALL ABOUT?
MOST OF THE THINGS HERE HAVE BEEN PUT AWAY.
SO IT'S JUST AS I THOUGHT...
WOULD YOU CARE FOR SOME CAKE?
CLINK

74

WHEN ARE YOU ALL MOVING OUT OF THE GARNET PALACE?
YOU'RE VERY PERCEP-TIVE.

CONSORT ADUO WILL BE MADE TO LEAVE.
ALL THESE PACKED BOXES TELL ME...
...THAT THIS PALACE WILL BE WELCOMING A NEW CONSORT ALONG WITH THE NEW YEAR.

75

...IS THE SOLE REASON SHE HAS BEEN ABLE TO MAINTAIN HER CURRENT POSITION FOR SO LONG.
THE PROFOUND BOND SHE SHARES WITH THE EMPEROR FROM HAVING NURSED AT THE SAME BREAST, ONE CLOSER THAN EVEN THAT OF BLOOD...
THINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT NOW IF HER SON, BORN 17 YEARS AGO...
...WAS STILL ALIVE TODAY.
SHE HAS NO POWERFUL PATRON ON HER SIDE...
...WHO COULD STOP THAT FROM HAPPEN-ING.
IT'S ALMOST AS IF...
NO FEMININE SCENT HANGS ABOUT HER PERSON EITHER.
SHE CUTS A GALLANT FIGURE, LIKE THAT OF A MAN.

...SHE'S TURNED FROM A WOMAN INTO A EUNUCH.
CON-SORT ADUO ...
...I'M CONFIDENT ON THIS POINT, SO ALL I CAN DO IS COME OUT AND ASK.
... BUT ...
I HATE TO VOICE ASSUMP-TIONS...
...CAN NO LONGER BEAR CHILDREN, CAN SHE?

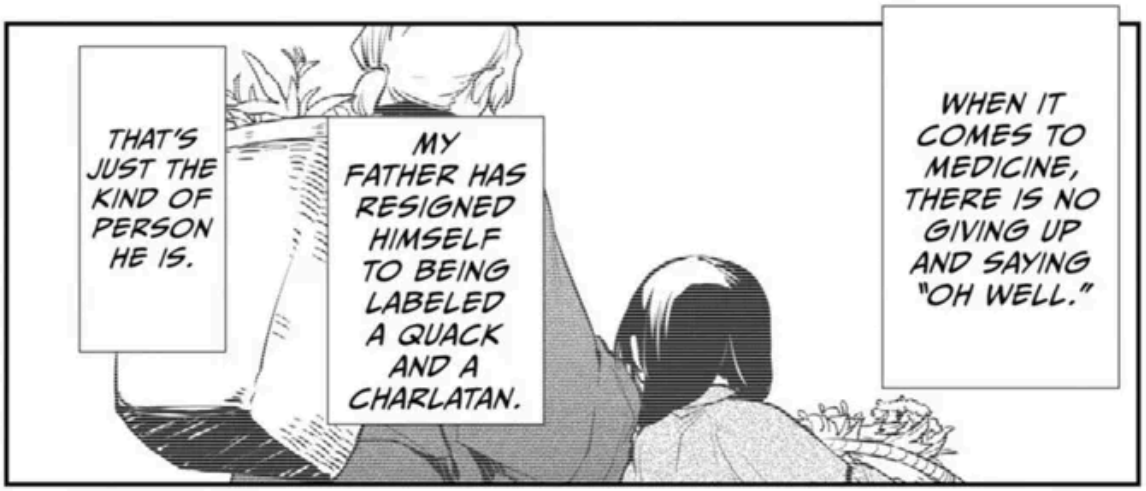
...THE EMPEROR HAS NO NEED OF A BARREN CONSORT IN HIS HAREM.
EVEN IF THEY HAVE BEEN MARRIED FOR A LONG TIME...
I DON'T SEE HOW THAT IS ANY OF YOUR CONCERN.
SOME-THING UNTOWARD HAPPENED DURING THE BIRTH, DIDN'T IT?
BUT IT DOES CONCERN ME.
THE PERSON WHO DELIVERED THE BABY IS MY ADOPTIVE FATHER.

THE PHYSICIANS OF THE INNER COURT ARE ALWAYS SHORT-HANDED.
SO MUCH SO THAT EVEN THE QUACK HAS MANAGED TO KEEP HIS POSITION FOR SO LONG.
IF YOU'RE ALREADY WORKING IN THE SPECIALIZED FIELD OF MEDICINE AS A DOCTOR...
...THERE'S NO NEED TO BECOME A EUNUCH JUST TO DO YOUR JOB, AFTER ALL.
CLATTER-
MY PA ISN'T THE MOST ADEPT AT HANDLING SOCIAL SITUA-TIONS.
HE MUST HAVE BEEN COERCED INTO IT.
79

DID THE MISFORTUNE ARISE BECAUSE THE EMPEROR'S BROTHER WAS BEING BORN AT THE SAME TIME?
WAS THE CONSORT'S LIFE WEIGHED AGAINST THAT OF THE EMPRESS?
WAS THAT WHY SHE WAS MADE TO WAIT? IT MUST HAVE BEEN A DIFFICULT BIRTH FOR HER.
THAT WAS WHEN IT HAPPENED, WASN'T IT?
THAT WAS WHEN CONSORT ADUO LOST HER WOMB.
AND AFTER ALL THAT...
...THE CHILD SHE WORKED SO HARD TO BEAR...
...DIED IN INFANCY.
80

YOU FEEL RESPON-SIBLE, DON'T YOU?
I EXPECT IT FELL TO YOU TO TAKE CARE OF THE BABE...
...WHILE CONSORT ADUO WAS INDISPOSED.

IN-DEED.
I FIND THAT SURPRISING, GIVEN YOU'RE THE DAUGHTER OF THE CHARLATAN WHO COULDN'T EVEN AID LADY ADUO IN HER TIME OF NEED.
...YOU KNOW IT ALL, DON'T YOU?


THAT'S JUST THE KIND OF PERSON HE IS.
MY FATHER HAS RESIGNED HIMSELF TO BEING LABELED A QUACK AND A CHARLATAN.
WHEN IT COMES TO MEDICINE, THERE IS NO GIVING UP AND SAYING "OH WELL."

...BUT THAT'S NOT TRUE, IS IT?
...OF POISONED FACE POWDER...
RUMOR HAS IT, THE CHILD DIED AS A RESULT...

I BELIEVE YOUR SO-CALLED "CHARLA-TAN"...
...SAW TO IT THAT THE POWDER CONTAINING WHITE LEAD WAS BANNED FROM THE INNER COURT.
AND YOU, AS CLEVER AS YOU ARE, WOULD NEVER HAVE LET THE CHILD COME INTO CONTACT WITH SOME-THING SO DEADLY.
THE CHILD'S TRUE CAUSE OF DEATH...
...WAS THIS.

THERE IS A WIDE VARIETY OF POISONOUS PLANTS.
WOLFS-BANE AND AZALEA, TO NAME A FEW.
THE NECTAR FROM THEIR BLOOMS IS TOXIC AS WELL.
EVEN ADULTS POISONED BY THEM WOULD DISPLAY SYMPTOMS, NEVER MIND A CHILD.
SINCE YOU COME FROM A FAMILY OF BEEKEEPERS ...
...I WOULD EXPECT YOU TO KNOW ALL ABOUT THIS.
I AM AWARE.
BUT WHAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW...

...WHICH YOU YOURSELF TASTED AND THOUGHT TO BE A NUTRITIOUS SUPPLE-MENT...
...IS THAT EVEN BASIC, NONTOXIC HONEY...
...COULD BE LETHAL TO A BABY WITH WEAK RESISTANCES.

MY FATHER, LUOMEN, WAS THE HEAD PHYSICIAN AT THE TIME.
AS A RESULT OF HIS FAILURES, BEGINNING WITH THE HANDLING OF THE DELIVERIES...
...HE WAS MUTILATED AS PUNISHMENT, THE BONES OF ONE KNEE EXTRACTED...
...AND BANISHED FROM THE INNER COURT.
...AND THE CAUSE OF HIS DEATH WAS A MYSTERY.
THUS, CONSORT ADUO'S CHILD PASSED AWAY...
YOU DIDN'T WANT CONSORT ADUO TO DISCOVER...
...THAT IT WAS YOU WHO HAD CAUSED THE DEATH OF HER ONE AND ONLY CHILD.
THAT'S WHY YOU TRIED TO ELIMINATE CONSORT LISHU.

IF YOU WOULD BE SO KIND... PLEASE TELL ME HOW YOU KNOW HER.
ARE YOU ACQUAINTED WITH LADY FENGMING, THE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING OF THE GARNET PALACE?
.....
UM...
THAT'S HOW I KNOW FENG-MING.
...I USED TO SPEND A LOT OF TIME WITH LADY ADUO.

CONSORT ADUO, IN TURN, WAS QUITE FOND OF CONSORT LISHU.
DURING THE REIGN OF THE LATE EMPEROR ...
...CONSORT LISHU WAS VERY CLOSE TO CONSORT ADUO.
I WONDER IF CONSORT ADUO KEPT LADY LISHU CLOSE...
...TO PREVENT THE HIS MAJESTY FROM SEEKING PLEASURE IN THE YOUNG GIRL'S BED.
A YOUNG GIRL ESTRANGED FROM HER PARENTS...
...AND A WOMAN WHO COULD NEVER AGAIN BEAR A CHILD...

AND THAT'S WHEN ...
...YOU HEARD FROM CONSORT LISHU ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HER AS A CHILD.
IT WAS A KIND OF CODEPEN-DENCY.
ABOUT HOW SHE'D INGESTED HONEY AS A BABY...
...AND NEARLY PASSED OVER INTO THE REALM OF THE DEAD...
IF CONSORT LISHU'S FREQUENT VISITS CONTINUED ...
...THERE WAS A CHANCE SHE WOULD TELL CONSORT ADUO ABOUT HER CLOSE CALL WITH HONEY.
IN HER WISDOM, CONSORT ADUO MIGHT HAVE THEN SENSED SOMETHING AMISS ABOUT HER OWN BABY'S DEATH.

AND THAT, YOU WERE DESPER-ATE TO AVOID.
AND SO, YOU CAME UP WITH EXCUSES ...
...TO DRIVE CONSORT LISHU AWAY WHENEVER SHE CAME CALLING.
AND THAT'S WHEN THE LAST EMPEROR PASSED AWAY.
CONSORT LISHU WAS PACKED OFF TO TAKE MONASTIC VOWS, NEVER KNOWING THE REAL REASON SHE WAS BEING SPURNED.
YOU MUST'VE BEEN SO RELIEVED.
BUT THEN, THE GIRL YOU WERE SO SURE YOU WOULD NEVER SEE AGAIN...
...CAME BACK TO THE INNER COURT...

...STILL A HIGH-RANKING CONSORT, JUST LIKE CONSORT ADUO.
AND NOW SHE WAS IN A POSITION TO THREATEN CONSORT ADUO'S OWN.
...LIKE A CHILD SEEKING OUT HER MOTHER.
...CAME CALLING ON LADY ADUO...
DESPITE THIS, SHE SHAME-LESSLY...

WHAT IS IT YOU WANT, EXACTLY?
I DON'T SEEK TO EXTORT YOU OR ANY-THING.
YOU CAN ASK ME FOR WHATEVER YOU'D LIKE.
GLINT
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AND THAT'S WHY YOU TRIED TO GET RID OF HER.

YOU DO REALIZE THAT...
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TENSE
...THERE'S NO POINT IN TRYING TO BRIBE ME, RIGHT?
...DO YOU...
...HAVE SOMEONE WHO'S PRECIOUS TO YOU?

SO WHEN I BEGAN SERVING CONSORT ADUO AT THE START, IT WAS A GREAT SHOCK TO ME.
SHE POS-SESSES SUCH A STRONG WILL, DESPITE BEING A WOMAN.
I'VE...
...ALWAYS DONE AS MY PARENTS TOLD ME.
AND I BECAME A LADY-IN-WAITING, JUST AS THEY SAID I SHOULD.
EVEN WHEN SPEAKING TO THE CROWN PRINCE, SHE HELD HER OWN.
I RESPECTED HER FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART.

I BELIEVED HER TO BE THE ONE AND ONLY PERSON IN THE WORLD WHOM I SHOULD EVER SERVE.
TELL ME.
DO YOU KNOW...
CONSORT ADUO BECAME THE PERSON MOST DEAR TO ME.
...WHAT IS MOST PRECIOUS TO THE PERSON WHO IS MOST PRECIOUS TO YOU?
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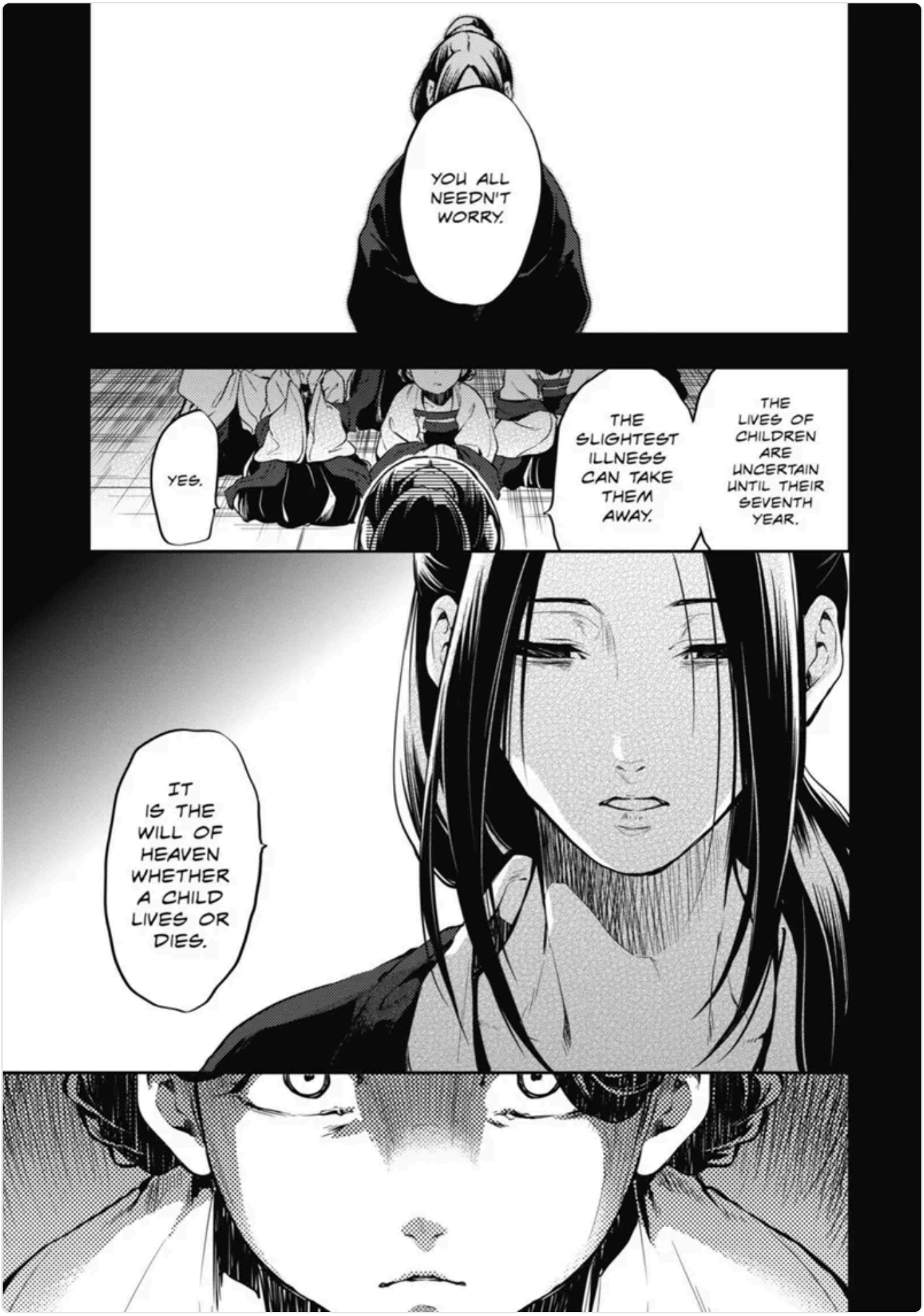
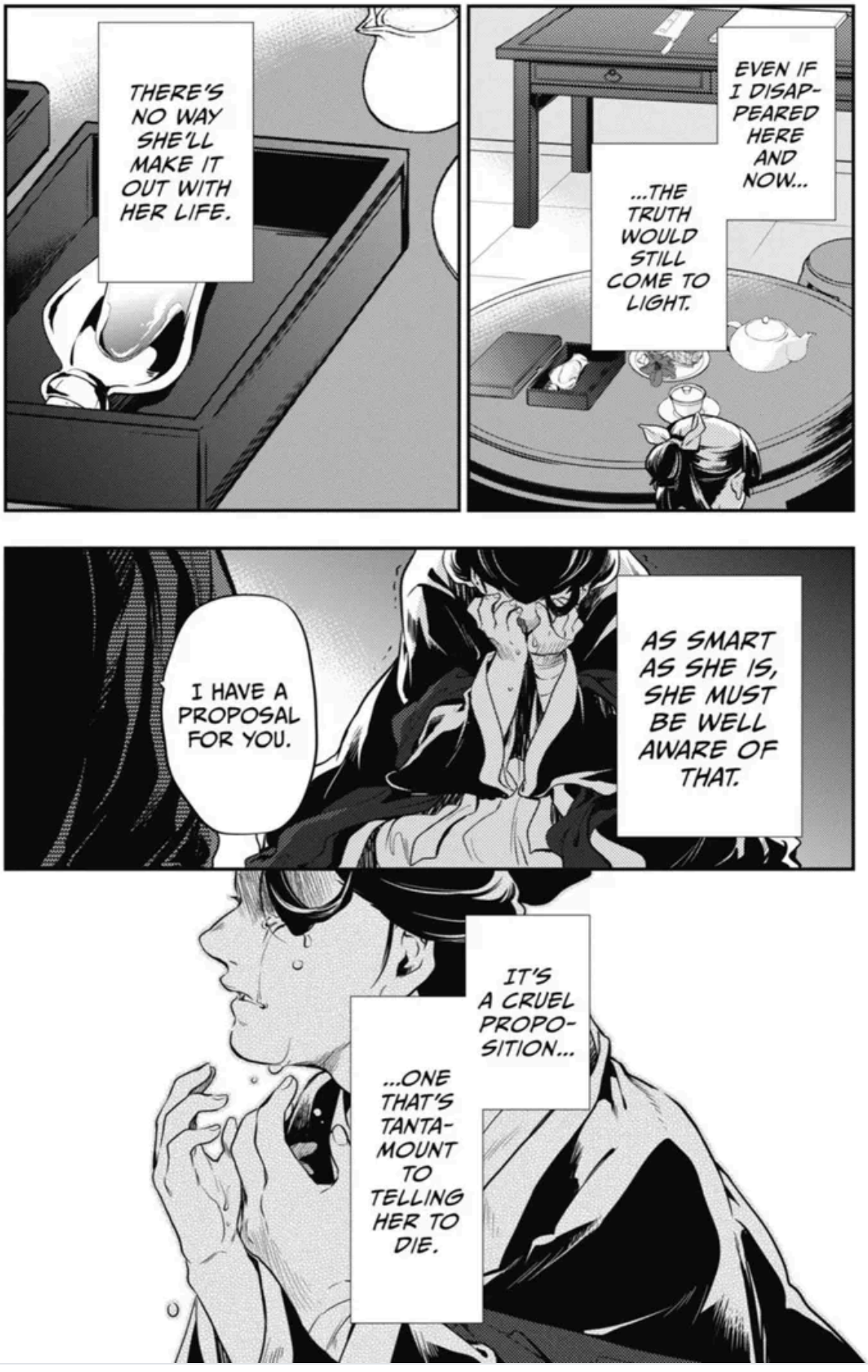
WELL, I RIPPED HERS FROM HER ARMS!
I STOLE THE MOST PRECIOUS THING IN THE WORLD FROM HER!
WITH THESE VERY HANDS!
THE DARLING BABE SHE TREASURED LIKE A PRECIOUS JEWEL!
...AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT SHE SAID?


YOU ALL NEEDN'T WORRY.
YES.
THE SLIGHTEST ILLNESS CAN TAKE THEM AWAY.
THE LIVES OF CHILDREN ARE UNCERTAIN UNTIL THEIR SEVENTH YEAR.
IT IS THE WILL OF HEAVEN WHETHER A CHILD LIVES OR DIES.

...NIGHT AFTER NIGHT!
BUT I KNEW SHE'D BEEN WEEPING INCON-SOLABLY ...
AHHH...
AHHH...
DRIP
DRIP
WHAT MUST HAVE...
...RUN THROUGH THIS WOMAN'S HEAD AS SHE DEVOTED HER-SELF TO SERVING HER LADY THESE 17 YEARS?

ALL THAT SHE HAS DONE HAS BEEN FOR CONSORT ADUO.
THAT'S WHY I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS SHE'S HOPING TO ACHIEVE.
I DON'T GET IT.
I DON'T HAVE IT IN ME TO REVERE ANOTHER PERSON TO THAT EXTENT.
...SEEING AS HE PRETTY MUCH HAS THE RUN OF THE INNER COURT.
THERE'S NO HIDING ANYTHING FROM THAT EUNUCH...
GAO SHUN WOULD'VE REPORTED BACK TO JINSHI ON MY MOVEMENTS BY NOW.


THERE'S NO WAY SHE'LL MAKE IT OUT WITH HER LIFE.
EVEN IF I DISAP-PEARED HERE AND NOW...
...THE TRUTH WOULD STILL COME TO LIGHT.
I HAVE A PROPOSAL FOR YOU.
AS SMART AS SHE IS, SHE MUST BE WELL AWARE OF THAT.
IT'S A CRUEL PROPO-SITION...
...ONE THAT'S TANTA-MOUNT TO TELLING HER TO DIE.

BUT IF THAT'S ACCEPTABLE TO YOU...
THE OUTCOME WILL NOT CHANGE.

...PLEASE DO AS I SAY.

FWUMP
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I'M SPENT.
ゴロン
ROLL
I WANT TO HAVE A BATH ...
...BUT THAT'S NOT HAPPENING. AT THE VERY LEAST, I CAN CHANGE OUT OF THESE CLOTHES, I SUPPOSE.

A BLOW FROM THAT WOULD'VE REALLY HURT.
...BUT I'M GLAD I DIDN'T END UP NEEDING IT.
I PADDED MYSELF WITH OILED PAPER JUST IN CASE...
AND SO...
...FENG-MING TURNED HERSELF IN.
DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS?

DIDN'T YOU HAVE GAO SHUN COLLECT ALL THOSE DOCUMENTS FOR YOU, THOUGH?
...THE CULPRIT TURNED HERSELF IN?
BUT ISN'T IT A GOOD THING...
NOPE. THAT'S NEWS TO ME.
PLAYING DUMB

...BUT IT WAS ALL FOR NAUGHT.
MM. I DID.
I THOUGHT I MIGHT LEARN SOME-THING FROM THEM...

...WAS ENSURING THAT CONSORT ADUO WOULD KEEP HER RANK AS ONE OF THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS.
FENG-MING'S MOTIVE...

...ROLL HER TWO MOTIVES INTO ONE.
...THAT SHE...
I PUT IT TO FENG-MING...
YOU DON'T SAY?
...SHE COULD DIE KNOWING THAT HER BELOVED CONSORT ADUO WOULD NEVER LEARN THE TRUTH ABOUT HER BABY'S DEMISE.
EVEN IF FENGMING COULDN'T ESCAPE DEATH...
THAT WAS THE MOST I, A MERE SERVING GIRL WITH NO POWER TO SPEAK OF, COULD DO FOR HER.

BUT IT'S ALREADY BEEN DETERMINED THAT CONSORT ADUO IS GOING TO LOSE HER PLACE HERE.
...IS THAT DUE TO FENGMING'S ACTIONS?
NO.
SHE HAD NO BEARING ON THIS DECI-SION.
IT WAS DECIDED SOME TIME AGO.

AFTER SHE LEAVES THE INNER COURT...
...CONSORT ADUO WILL RELOCATE TO THE IMPERIAL VILLA IN THE SOUTH.
SETTING UP A DEMOTED CONSORT IN AN IMPERIAL RESIDENCE IS UNUSUAL, TO BE SURE...
...BUT IT IS WHAT THE HAS EMPEROR DECREED.

I SEE.
THESE FLOWERS ...

ぷ?
PLUCK
HONG-NIANG JUST PLACED THEM THERE.
THEY'RE BLOOMING OUT OF SEASON.
?
PLUCK
ぷちっ
ちう
SUCK
!
THIS IS REALLY SWEET.
ちゅう
SUCK
109

BFFFT!
!!!
THEY'RE POISONOUS, THOUGH.
HEH!
BLEEERGH!
DON'T WORRY. IT WON'T KILL YOU.